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ABSTRACT

This paper examines constructs of school violence among 11 teachers in a large urban secondary school and a large rural district high school. It describes how these teachers contextualize their particular schools, and explores contradictions between teachers' constructions of violence in schools in general and their particular constructions of violence in their own schools. To assist children in acquiring appropriate social skills, teachers need to be aware of various definitions of violence, which includes verbal, emotional, and psychological aggression as well as physical force. It is also noted that stereotypical perceptions of rural society and schools as idyllic sanctuaries from big-city ills have not kept pace with the realities of changing rural communities and school consolidation. The qualitative study consisted of interviews and classroom observation of the teachers. Findings show that teachers' definitions of violence were consistent within and between the urban and rural schools, and that their constructions of their particular schools as generally nonviolent were consistent. There were marked differences between how teachers' generally constructed violence in their particular schools and the image of violence that emerged in the interviews: urban teachers' assessment of their school was more severe than the actuality, and rural teachers' constructions of violence varied widely from the actual accounts of violence in their schools. Rural teachers had difficulty rationalizing their idealized images of a traditional rural community school with the new reality of their large rural district and were unwilling to acknowledge the closing gap between rural and urban school violence. More study is needed on cultural mental imaging and extent to which images and mind-sets influence teachers' behavior when dealing with school violence. Contains 23 references. (SAS)

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Teachers' Images and Urban/Rural Constructs of Violence

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Objectives/Purpose of the Study:

This study seeks to document consistencies and contradictions between "teachers' ideas, images, and theories that mystify social reality and block social change" (Kellner quoted in Giroux and McLaren, 1989, p.187), with respect to violence. That is, the three objectives of this study are:

(i) to document the consistencies and contradictions of constructions of violence in schools as articulated by a sampling of teachers in different school/community contexts;

(ii) to describe, from their perspective on violence, how these teachers contextualize their particular schools;

(iii) to explore the contradictions between and among:

(a) teachers' general constructions of violence in schools,

(b) teachers' ideas and images concerning violence in their own schools, and

(c) teachers' particular constructions of violence in their own schools using their own articulated definitions of violence as the point of reference.

Perspective/Theoretical Framework:

As custodians of education, teachers normally spend six or more hours a day, five days per week with school-aged juveniles in school and classroom settings. In conjunction with obtaining an education, these environments typically require children to follow rules, interact appropriately with peers and adults, participate in teacher-directed activities, and refrain from disrupting or disturbing the learning activities of others. As part of their pedagogical responsibilities, teachers assist children in acquiring the social, organizational, and cultural behavioural skills that will

enable them to become viable members of our contemporary society (Ungerleider, 1991). Yet, sooner or later every teacher becomes involved with some aspect of violent and aggressive behaviour that interrupts the educational process, threatens personal safety, and is generally disruptive to the harmonious functioning of school and classroom (Goldstein et al, 1984). However, as Lewis Coser *(The Functions of Social Conflict* 1964) and others (Feinberg & Soltis, 1992; Cherryholmes, 1988; Freire, 1985) have frequently pointed out, conflict is a common enough form of social interaction. But, somewhere along the way, and for disparate reasons, conflict heightens, pushing the limits of acceptable behaviour. Indeed, there has been considerable debate over the meaning and extent of aggression in schools. Even a mutually-defined understanding among teachers of the concept of *violence* is by no means presumable. The behaviour they include may depend largely upon their interpretation of the term and the context in which it is applied. Does violent behaviour encompass only physical violence, or does it include verbal and emotional abuse too? If we examine even three definitions it will become clear that they are all similar, yet somewhat different. For example,

(i) Rich (1992) defined violence as *a sudden and extremely forceful act that causes physical harm or suffering to persons or animals.*

(ii) Hranitz and Eddowes (1990) suggested a more inclusive definition of *violence* as *a pattern of behaviour that involves direct aggression against another person.* They then explicated their definition by adding that it can come in many forms including *homicide, beatings, psychological and emotional harm, and forced sex with a person of any age.*

(iii) One researcher included as an important addendum to the more inclusive definition of school violence: *behaviour subjectively perceived by the teacher as deliberately meant to be hurtful to another* (Rintoul-Galloway, 1994).[1] Inconsistencies regarding meaning could perhaps explain why an earlier researcher (Wayson, 1985) found school violence rare. His criteria, for example, did not include verbal or emotional abuse. Understanding that violence in schools merely reflects the violence of the larger society is scarcely comforting to the teachers, administrators, parents, and students who traditionally have regarded school as a haven of safety. Moreover, it is curious that schools appear to be held to a higher standard than the larger society, in that there is a consensus among the community at large that schools should be free from violence even though the rest of society is not. In addition, there is apparently one other widely-held assumption regarding violence in schools—that it is primarily an **urban** problem.

In years past, the rural school, with its typically small enrolment, family atmosphere, and personal relationship with the community, was felt to be largely immune to the kind of urban violence that is currently receiving so much research attention. Moreover, the ethic of rural living continues to evoke images of honest, hard-working village folk, enjoying a simple, yet comfortable and happy lifestyle–the so-called 'good life'(Beck, 1993), in which people know, care about, and look after their neighbours. Intriguingly, these stereotypical perceptions do have an element of truth, for studies have shown that rural areas have less crime and violence than

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[1]The difficulty here of course is in the terms 'subjectively' and 'perceived.' To illustrate, an example comes to mind, that of *teasing*. Sometimes there is a very fine line between playful teasing and teasing with intent to be hurtful, that is, malice. What one person may interpret as teasing, and therefore, play, may strike another as hurtful and malicious taunting, and therefore, violent.

their urban neighbours. The incidence of rural violence is on the rise, however. It is unreasonable to presume that country living has been frozen in time when its urban neighbour has been subjected to rapid change. Yet, country living as the cure-all escape from fast-paced city life, is in fact, the image that persists in marketing ads from soft drinks to real estate, and from laundry detergent to blue jeans. Although rural life has changed, the changes perhaps have not had the immediacy of those of the urban situation. Smaller and scattered rural population, the enormous geographical distances involved, and the continued self-interest of large urban populations all contribute to the fact that rural education remains largely ignored as a venue for research. Thus, the myth of country living as the last bastion of idyllic bliss, an escape and sanctuary from the frenetic pace and ills of the big city continues to persist.

Rural schooling too, has been embroiled in change. In response to challenging economic times, the 'traditional' rural school has come under fiscal attack and, as a consequence, school consolidations are on the rise. A new breed of school, the large district rural school, a kind of transition school [which, in its physical characteristics at least, is scarcely distinguishable from its urban and suburban cousins], is replacing many small schools. Like their large metropolitan counterparts, district rural schools of 2000 students or more are not uncommon.

While *rural education* evokes certain mental images and ideas, there appears to be an abstruseness about what *rural education* actually encompasses. While researchers agree that rural education is *neither urban nor suburban*, beyond that, any definitive understanding of the broadly diverse and 'multiple realities' of rural schooling can vary significantly (Nachtigal,

1982). For example, rural education may incorporate geographic units with dozens of schools having vast student enrolments or involve very isolated districts, sparsely populated, and having comparatively small enrolments (DeYoung, 1991). At least one researcher concluded that the lack of precision concerning the definition of rural education may be part of the reason why it has often been ignored as an area of investigation (Nachtigal, 1982), coupled with the generally-accepted assumption that school violence remains, for the most part, an urban problem. It is in relation to this last widely-held assumption that the most interesting inconsistencies of this study became manifest.

Method of Inquiry/Data Sources/Evidence

The analysis draws on findings from a recent, qualitative, descriptive study of two schools, one urban and one rural. Teachers in these two schools were invited to participate and from those who indicated an interest, a purposive, non-random sampling procedure was used to select 11 experienced full-time secondary school teachers from the filtered pool [each having five years teaching experience or more]. Six were teachers of a large district high school in a small rural community, and five were teachers of a large urban secondary school in a major metropolitan area. The study focussed on the perceptions of teachers as those who deal with violence 'on the front line' and who are the prime implementors of any educational change. A schedule of interview questions was developed from the research objectives, but the schedule's function was more in the nature of a reference and guide (Merriam, 1988; Glesne & Peshkin, 1992). Interviews, often several hours in length, semi-structured and interpretive in nature, yielded

descriptions rich in detail (Tierney, 1987). Recorded classroom observations provided further insights (Tierney, 1987), into the multiple realities, diverse perspectives, and idiosyncratic behaviours of the classroom teachers.

As humans change themselves and the world around them in a continual and reciprocal process (Giddens, 1993), an individual's perception of reality constantly changes in the ebb and flow of these shared processes (Tierney, 1987). Because our world is socially constructed, the layers of meaning incorporated within that reality may be mediated by a myriad of implicit influences both subjective and objective, for example: the culture of the organization, historical tradition, current situational contexts, and individual perception about how one thinks life should be or how one wishes it to be (Tierney, 1987). Just how, and to what extent these (and other) influences impinge meaning is impossible to predict. Meanings, after all, are mental constructions that reflect the infinite events, circumstances, and interactions of human experience (Tierney & Lincoln, 1994). Moreover, the extent to which these contingencies interact may vary profoundly among individuals. Furthermore, meaning depends upon the individual and the experiential baggage (s)he brings to that occurrence. To illustrate, a teacher's response to violence may not necessarily be determined by the incident itself, but rather by the image the teacher has of the school in that particular setting, the nature of the people involved, or even how the teacher perceives his/her own life experience at that particular moment. In this study, the juxtaposing of an in-depth interview approach with classroom observation facilitated a higher level of participation and interaction which helped me to contextualize participants' comments

and to comprehend more clearly how they understood and made meaning of their experiences (Seidman, 1991). As researchers we are primarily concerned with understanding and recounting these "lived actions" (Anderson, 1994, p.153) in a meaningful way, but we also recognize that some interpretation on the part of the researcher is involved in all acts of understanding and recounting the world of others. Therefore, in an effort to 'get it right,' additional interviews during and following the classroom observation phase were conducted to further enhance interpretation and to validate understanding of the multiple layers of meaning (Glesne & Peshkin, 1992; Seidman, 1991; Van Maanen, 1988) .

Results and Conclusions:

Teachers' definitions of violence were remarkably consistent within and between the urban and rural schools. Although physical violence was cited by teachers in both the urban and rural settings at the first kind of violence that came to mind, it was by no means the only criterion mentioned. Examples cited by urban educators included,

> *...definitely physical contact, that comes to mind first, definitely threats, swearing, non-verbal kinds of threats— eye contact; gang behaviour...*
>
> *...the overt kinds of violence, beating people up; verbal abuse, psychological abuse, emotional abuse — all that is intimidation*
>
> *verbal assault...any kind of unwanted aggressive behaviour*

Rural educators too, named the physical as that which first came to mind in any discussion of violence, but, again, other criteria were mentioned.

> *any force is unacceptable if the motive behind it is to be hurtful or violent*

> *intolerance of kids that are slower; verbal put-downs, even kids putting themselves down; self-abuse like poor personal hygiene and not caring for themselves generally or not caring about their academics...self-abuse*

> *I think emotional when we're talking violence. Verbal and emotional abuse are more of an issue than the physical.*

> *other kinds — like psychological, verbal, that is, student to student, student to teacher, teacher to student, teacher to teacher...*

The teachers' general constructions of violence in their particular schools were also consistent within and between schools. Teachers in the urban setting generally perceived their schools as non-violent, but having, from time to time, a somewhat aggressive tenor. For example, the urban teachers responses included,

> *We've had a bit of violence from time to time but generally speaking I'd characterize this school as being really peaceful compared to other schools in the area...*

> *Not too much violence here. We have had incidents though...*

> *I wouldn't say it's so much violence as acts of aggression.*

The teachers in the rural setting also perceived their school as non-violent. From the rural educators came these responses,

> *I probably only think of it* (violence) *in terms of inner city...*

> *I think we've been fortunate here that we've not had a lot of violence at all!*

> ***We** don't really have a violent disposition that can lead to escalation.*

Only two teachers, one in the urban setting and one in the rural conceded that they were concerned about school violence and would characterize their school as somewhat violent but only to a limited degree. Nevertheless, from an urban Special Education teacher came this

declaration,

> *Worry about violence? Oh for sure!*

From a rural teacher, also of Special Education, came this,

> *I do,* (that is, worry about violence) *because of the population numbers. They tend to— you know, get a little excitable— the hierarchical kind of approach. The general sociological disposition of violence in this community though— there's nothing outstanding there.*

However, as the interviews proceeded there were marked differences between how teachers' generally constructed violence in their particular schools and the image of violence that emerged in response to the in-depth interview questions. Although the urban educators' assessment of their school in regard to violence was somewhat more severe than the actual description of their school's violence would seem to indicate, using their own definition of violence as the point of reference, it was reasonably consistent with their actual accounts of violent and aggressive behaviour that the interview questions elicited. However, when rural teachers' responded to the interview questions, their general constructions of violence of their particular rural school setting varied widely from the actual accounts of violence in their schools, again using their own definition of violence as the point of reference. The image that most of the rural educators generally constructed of their large district rural school more resembled an idealized vision of a small rural community school in a pastoral village of earlier times where seemingly everyone knew everyone else, cared for each other, and where 'apparently' nothing violent ever happened. These idyllic images contrasted dramatically with the teachers' actual constructions of violence in their schools, as elicited by the in-depth interview questions. Many of these contrasting

constructions of violence were also corroborated during consequent classroom observation. However, recurring responses depicting violence in the rural school setting were invariably amended by a variety of comments, all similar, such as "*well, I know it doesn't sound too great, but I live here and I know these kids ... this isn't the big city you know...*"

Said one teacher in the rural setting,

> *At this juncture, generally speaking, we don't deal with psychopaths, we don't deal with sociopathic personalities, we don't deal with really hard-core junk. We've just got a nice sociological mix, you're not dealing with kids that are basically drunken, angry.*

However, this same teacher in the next moment conceded that,

> *Drugs are everywhere and we do see lots of broken homes, drunk and molested girls, kids using alcohol to excess- but that's the only way they know how to socialize.*

The head of Special Education thoughtfully declared,

> *Well, I think we've been fortunate here that we've not had a lot of violence at all!*

Nevertheless, she too advanced conflicting information in the latter part of her interview.

> *How we thought of booze on a Friday night, that's what they* (the students) *now think of drugs. Some are from broken homes but lots from ordinary homes too. And I think kids by-and-large find it's part of their lifestyle. The community...it's a nice sleepy little town, so it's a central area for distributing drugs. It's a big testing ground. A lot of it* (the problem) *is broken homes, kids have been abused by their parents, marriages ending.*

She stanchly defends her school as non-violent, but concedes that "ugly, racially-motivated incidents" have occurred from time to time. It seems that minorities new to the area are either subjected to "thrashings" or "ignored altogether" as social outcasts. She explained that this is to be expected in a setting that is "largely White Anglo Saxon" and therefore unfamiliar with other cultures. She also recounts incidence of sexual abuse between a father and daughter that

eventually went to court with the father ordered to stay completely distant from his daughter. Instead, the father continued to stalk the daughter on her way to school, yet, because the stalking occurred off school property, nothing further was done by the school. But another teacher[2] quickly dispelled the myth of an idyllic country existence,

> *It's not just a sleepy little town. Every kind of drug is around. Whatever is popular, is here. There is a lot of drinking. People seem to think that's the way to socialize. The 'food and family' thing is not that intense around here. For the most part there is not that open, loving, comraderie or whatever. It seems to be somehow lacking. There are a lot of broken homes and even some of them that aren't, they should be, fractured at least. Parents leave at 6:00 a.m. come home at 6:00 p.m. Then they have to relax, so they go out to play hockey or ball and the kids are left alone a lot. I've heard that parents almost give up when the kids are 13 or 14. They don't know what to do with the kids when they reach that age. They almost expect teachers to take over. I wonder how many of these kids sit down and have dinner with their parents?*

Comments questioning the lack of a vital family-life ethic are curious because (as several teachers mentioned) many of these country dwellers are displaced urbanites searching for an improved life quality that has long been romanticized as the cornerstone of traditional rural society. In many instances these new country livers have deliberately relocated to this country setting searching for a respite from the social ills that they feel are rampant in large metropolitan settings. Even most of the teachers themselves cited, in the 'getting acquainted' segment of the interview, hopes for a better life-quality as the main reason for residing away from large metropolitan areas. In particular, they mentioned substance abuse (especially drugs and alcohol), a more physically-violent society, poor family-community cohesion, and a generally impersonal

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[2] This teacher alone, of all the rural teachers, seemed under no illusions about the so-called ideal existence widely attributed to a rural school setting.

lifestyle as major ills of urban society.

As the interviews with the rural teachers progressed, it soon became apparent that two contradictory strands were emerging. On the one hand, there was the supposition that a rural setting, geographically isolated from large metropolitan areas, was somehow also insulated from the alleged ravages of violence which, many argued, is almost exclusively a phenomenon of urban society. On the other hand, some educators were of the opinion that there is something almost indefinable in the mystique of rural living itself that lulls people into an impractical and specious sense that 'real' violence couldn't happen there. Paradoxically, it was often the same people who held both impressions! One rural-setting teacher, who staunchly defends her school setting as non-violent, has been a constituent part of the community since her early teenage years, in essence, growing up with the community. Thus, she may not be as aware of its failings and deficiencies or, at least be more accepting of them than another teacher who, as a grown woman, arrived in the community, regarding it with fresh, solely adult, and analytical eyes.

Educational Significance of the Study:

Although the face of education has evolved over time, a large percentage of the rural educators peculiar to this study have difficulty rationalizing their idealized mental image of the small-town, traditional rural community school with the new reality of their large rural district school-in-transition that, in almost every aspect, save geographical setting, has assumed many of the characteristics of its urban counterpart. Further, there appears to be an unwillingness to allow that a real case can be made for declaring that the so-called gap between rural school violence

and that of urban schools is closing rapidly and in some instances (such as this particular study] has even surpassed that of its urban counterpart. Mental imaging is deeply rooted in our culture and traditions, and is very difficult to change in any lasting way. It seems that little has been done to examine if, and to what extent, images and mind-sets influence teachers' behaviour when dealing with violence in schools. This study examines only two schools and more research needs to be undertaken before the results would in any way allow for generalizability. But in this particular instance, the lack of congruence between the idealized vision of the rural school and the recounted reality as it pertains to school violence could have serious consequences for school and community if, because of certain factors and conditions, teachers fail to consider seriously, issues of violence in schools.

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